Changing Patterns of Security in the Middle East and Central Asia 2005

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Rapporteur: Julia Voelker

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Introduction

On May 19, 2005, the Naval Postgraduate School and the Center for Naval Analyses held a workshop on Islamic extremism and terrorism in the Gulf and Central Asia. This conference was the third in a series of Center for Naval Analyses-Navy Postgraduate School co-hosted events. Below is a synopsis of some of the major findings:

Qualitative Vs. Quantitative Schools of Thought on Trends in Radical Islam

According to the first speaker, a focus on the logic of religious commitment in Islam reveals that the motivations for the often-violent actions taken by "Islamic extremists" are embedded in the original tenets of Islam. Comparing the dominant Sunni tradition with those traditions dominant in Christianity, the speaker emphasized that unlike Christians, who generally believe that one can achieve salvation by inward acts (repentance, contrition, devotion), Muslims tend to believe that they can only reach salvation by demonstrating their conformity to God's will through overt acts. The speaker argued that while it is possible for any Muslim to complete sufficient acts to achieve entrance into heaven, it is nonetheless very difficult for Muslims to know whether they have "done enough" to achieve salvation. However, he explained, a Muslim can assure himself/herself of meeting requirements for salvation by fulfilling the obligation of jihad (the duty of Muslims to expand the Muslim community, or umma, the ultimate aim of which is to bring the whole world under Islam). Jihad necessarily leads to one of two desirable fates for the believer: either one accomplishes good works as decreed by God and enhances one's chance in getting into heaven or one dies a martyr, ensuring a direct route to heaven. As a result, the speaker contends that there is an authentic Islamic tradition that partially explains the predisposition—or motivation—to be strident in Jihad, which, for some portion of the believers, will entail the use of violence.

Jihad waged against the unbelievers can be done through persuasion and education or, if necessary, by holy war. Jihad can also be waged against those who are considered unfaithful Muslims. Many radical Islamists see the need to impose *Sharia* law first over the "near" enemy in Muslim lands before imposing it on the "far" enemy in non-Muslim lands.

At first, jihad was a collective obligation—Muslim armies spreading Islam by the sword, a vehicle for a variation on imperial expansion. Overtime, jihad has evolved into an individual obligation in

which individual Muslims, independently or as part of a group, expand the *umma* among unbelievers. This, the speaker explained, partially accounts for the predisposition—or motivation—to the use of force, in jihad, among contemporary Muslims (However, this does not mean that all, or even most, Muslims will necessarily use force, nor does it mean that Muslims will always use force in certain situations).

A second speaker took a quantitative approach, identifying characteristics of three distinct strains of Islamist groups, or "clusters of Islamism." These he compared to each other based on impetus, ideology, violence, leaders, organizational structure, and durability.

- *Cluster One (Hamas, Chechen groups, and Hezbollah):* The impetus for these groups is opposition to foreign domination, most often non-Muslim. They seek to restore "the natural order" as they perceive it, which often means linking the principles and values of Islam to nationalism. These groups almost always employ violence to achieve their goals. Their leaders are mixed, meaning that they come from various backgrounds. Organizationally, they are highly secretive and cell-based and therefore typically durable and persistent.

- *Cluster Two (Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic political parties):* These organizations seek social change—they are driven by religious reform, not revolution. They rarely employ violence and are led by traditional Muslim authority figures. Organizationally, they are open and include broad social movements. Their strength tends to ebb and flow, depending on the political climate at a given time.

- *Cluster Three (Iranian Revolution, Al-Qa'ida):* Social change and state weakening are the primary objectives of cluster three groups. These groups tend to take action when there is a perceived opportunity, such as a period when the state is vulnerable for other reasons. They seek to go beyond reform to transform society and they often turn towards violence. They are often led by lay figures and/or marginalized clerics and are organized in clandestine cells.

Today in Iraq, the insurgency seems to be moving in the direction of a Cluster One group. Certain trends indicate that they may ultimately develop into a full-fledged Cluster One movement. At the same time, there is still hope that they could evolve into a more benign (at least in terms of U.S. goals) Cluster Two organization. For example, the insurgents have not yet successfully linked Islam with nationalism. In an ideal situation, a U.S. withdrawal would remove the impetus (foreign occupation) for the insurgency to evolve into a full-fledge Cluster One organization, and could create the conditions for the insurgency to evolve into a Cluster Two movement. The speaker, however, doubted the likelihood of this happening.

Stability in Saudi Arabia

Two U.S. speakers with years of experience in Saudi Arabia and a wide range of contacts there, discussed recent developments in the Kingdom:

The Islamic insurgency in Saudi Arabia is posing the gravest challenge to the regime in over 70 years. It is bottom-up and appears to be sustained. However, the insurgents have not been able to win over the majority of Saudis. While many Saudis are quick to say the insurgency is not serious, they are very reluctant to talk about it.

Two decades of the glorification of "Salafi Jihadism" in Saudi Arabia is one of the primary reasons for the insurgency in the Kingdom today. Mainstream religious thinkers and clerics have long supported the idea of jihad, arguing that in some cases it is justifiable, if not required. The situation in Iraq has also fueled extremism in the Kingdom and many jihadists from Saudi Arabia

have gone to Iraq to fight (sources within the regime estimate that there the number of Saudis who have gone to Iraq to fight may number in the thousands). Some will be killed either in suicide bomb attacks or by Iraqi and coalition forces but the strong and smart will survive to fight another day—perhaps in Saudi Arabia itself.

The Saudi regime has taken a number of measures to de-legitimize "Bin Ladinism" in the Kingdom including effective efforts by the security forces to clamp down on the insurgents and a successful campaign to stop funding to terrorist organizations. The government has also launched a public relations campaign to marginalize violent jihadism. However, they are attempting to do so within the context of Wahabism, a task made difficult by the fact that Wahabism supports the idea of jihad and therefore Saudi religious leaders are not able to denounce jihad universally. The regime believes that they can diminish, if not eradicate, violent extremism by having the members of the state Islamic institutions publicly discuss the ideology of jihad in an effort to distinguish "legitimate" jihad from the violent, anti-state jihad carried out by insurgents.

Possible Sources of Instability

Presenters discussed a number of possible sources of instability that could pose a threat to the regime:

- The Shi'a—The nearly two million Shi'a living in Saudi Arabia are not a threat today but one potential source or tension lies in the refusal of anti-Shi'a Salafist hardliners in the kingdom to halt their anti-Shi'a rhetoric (and the regime does not appear willing to take them on over this). Whether or not this becomes a major problem will partly depend on the future of sectarian tensions in Iraq which might then spread into Saudi Arabia.

- Returning jihadists—Instability may increase when Saudis who went to fight the United States in Iraq return to Saudi Arabia and potentially decide to continue their jihad domestically.

- External threats—Iran poses a political threat to the Saudis with regard to its influence in Iraq. The Saudi royal family does not feel threatened by the Islamic Republic's conventional power but is concerned about the nuclear issue. The Saudis have a definite interest in seeing stability Iraq—particularly as it relates to the Shi'a population. Most of the sources of conflict between Saudi Arabia and Yemen have been settled.

Reform

Both speakers agreed that in the long-term, the regime does not want -- and is not now obliged by internal political pressures -- to make genuine efforts to reform. The Saudi royal family is not convinced that reform is the answer and in fact, it has taken steps backwards in this area. For example, the Saudis have almost completely dismantled the liberal opposition, Recently three out of twelve dissidents were convicted and given to 6-9 year prison terms for not apologizing for circulating a petition asking for a constitutional monarchy several years ago. The high revenues from the soaring price of oil allow the regime to continue to co-opt and buy off anyone pushing for change.

The Elections

According to one speaker, there were two notable observations about the February 2005 municipal elections:

- Very low participation—With the exception of the Eastern Province (the Shi'a dominated area), participation was very low, particularly in cities where politics in the country really happen. The low turn-out reflected the belief held by many Saudis that the elections were "stupid" and that there was really no point in voting.

- The Islamists mobilized—Prominent clerics within the kingdom supported certain Islamist candidates in the election using text messages and the internet to get voters to the polls. This effort worked and their supporters went out in droves to vote for the candidates that the religious leaders had placed on their "golden lists." Many of these candidates are Salafis who criticize the policies of the regime. The individuals behind them, supporting them, are the real hard-liners (many of whom have spent time in prison in the past for their anti-regime rhetoric). A prime example of these anti-regime clerics is Hawali, who spent five years in prison for criticizing the government. Today, he and others like him are being tolerated by the regime because even those openly critical of the regime represent far less of a threat to the regime than the "liberals" and democrats. The Islamists—no matter how critical of the regime they are—are tightly tied to the regime and the royal family knows that they will only go so far.

In general, both speakers agreed that the Kingdom today is not a weak state. It is in complete control with a brutal, but perhaps inefficient, security service that shows no signs of cracking. The greatest near-term potential threat to the regime is an intra-Saudi royal family dispute which forces factions to take sides against each other. One of the speakers warned, however, that the regime is "playing with fire" in allowing the Islamists to become stronger while keeping the political arena absolutely closed to all others. While this may solve short-term challenges, it is sowing the seeds for future, long-term instability.

Instability and Anti-Government Violence in the Central Asian Republics

According to one expert, anti-government violence and instability in the Central Asian Republics, and particularly in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, are directly linked presidential succession and regime change. In all of these five countries, there remains to varying degrees soviet-style authoritarian leaders. Each of these regimes has taken different paths towards democratization as a means to secure their own positions and, in general, there is not enough "readiness for succession" in these countries. This lack of readiness for succession is directly related to upheaval and violence.

With regard to the recent disorder in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the Ferghana Valley, which is shared by these two countries, is very poor and populous. It is also the area from which emerges the most anti-regime violent activity, indicating a possible link between socio-economic conditions and violence (in particular on the part of radical extremist groups). Government corruption, an inequitable distribution of wealth, and political repression are contributing to the radicalization of Muslim groups in these countries.

There are two main radical groups operating in Central Asia:

- The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)which was founded in 1998 and shares connections to Al-Qa'ida and the Taliban. They have claimed responsibility for a number of bombings and hostage takings. Their exact size, make-up and whether there are splinter groups remains largely in question today.

- Hezb al-Tahrirwas founded in Jordan and has established itself in Central Asia. This group is non-violent but uses a radical rhetoric. It seeks to overthrow central Asian governments and their activities have been banned in all countries except Kazakhstan.

The April 2005 violent protests in Andijan, Uzbekistan were sparked when 23 members of the community were arrested for alleged membership in Hezb al-Tahrir. The protests are important as this marks the first time that Uzbeks, historically a passive population, have in large numbers come out into the streets and demonstrated against the regime of President Islam Karimov. Although there is little-to-no real evidence so far that "Islamists" fomented these events, but the government is holding them responsible and citing the "Islamist threat" as reason to continue its crackdown both in eastern Uzbekistan and elsewhere in the country.

The Conflict in Chechnya

The presenter argued that the Chechen resistance movement can be traced through six distinct historical periods dating back to the czarist era. Efforts by the Soviet and Russian regimes to conquer Chechnya and to quash Chechen rebellions and separatists movements have backfired. Instead of achieving Chechen subordination, Moscow's strategies have only fueled fire of rebellion and contributed to the radicalization of the Chechens.

The speaker sees a number of other conditions as contributing to the conflict in Chechnya. First, over the years, there has been severely low morale in the Russian army and as a result has been susceptible to corruption including drug smuggling, accepting bribes, and even selling weapons to Chechen fighters. Second, rebels have used Islam to receive financial and military aid from Muslim organizations and countries. Russian President Vladimir Putin has made attempts to forge closer relationships with Muslims countries in an effort to demonstrate Moscow's tolerance, and even support, for Islam, but this has not had the desired effect of marginalizing radicalism in Chechnya. In fact, recent events such as the Beslan massacre have demonstrated that the rebels in Chechnya are far from subdued.

New Trends in Afghanistan: The Neo-Taliban

Perhaps one of the gravest threats facing a future of stability in Afghanistan is the neo-Taliban—a group of resurgent militants in Afghanistan who identify themselves as the Taliban, but are in fact more complex and diverse in their backgrounds and interests.

The "Taliban" of 2001 no longer exists as a defined movement, political party, or group today. According to the speaker, since 2002, the regime has been fighting an entirely new phenomenon: the neo-Taliban. The neo-Taliban has links to the Taliban regime's leadership and ideology, but is not made up of the same people, nor is it back by the same supporters as was the original Taliban. It is largely comprised of:

- Senior former Taliban leaders (after the reorganization of the movement under Mullah Omar in 2003);
- "Internationalist Islamists," such as those aligned with Al-Qa'ida;
- Disenchanted Pashtuns;
- Tanzim al-Fatah al-Afghanistan, Khaddam al-Furqan, and Jaysh al-Mulsimin;
- Warlords, Druglords;

- Common Criminals.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001 until about 2004, most illicit activities in the country were blamed on the Taliban—both by the government and by the actual perpetrators of these acts.

In terms of strategy, the current force structure of the neo-Taliban is based on small units that are easily deployable into localities where they do not know the terrain very well. Often, however, they have an acquaintance in the area to help them out. They often take action based on opportunity, as opposed to planning missions far in advance.

The demands of the neo-Taliban have evolved somewhat over the past few years but in 2005 Neo-Taliban leader Motma'en said directly that the aim of the neo-Taliban is not to "rule Afghanistan against the will of the people" but to "expel the foreign forces and achieve independence."

The Afghan government and coalition forces have taken military and political action to combat the neo-Taliban. While these efforts met with some success, there are more long-term goals that once achieved, will puncture the political attraction of the Taliban. When the Afghan people at last are confident of their personal security, standards of living rise, opium cultivation is controlled and sensitivity to religious and traditional differences established, the Taliban will loose its "mystique." Most importantly, foreign forces—both those supporting the Taliban and those opposed to it—must be removed from the country.

Regime Approaches to the Extremist Threat in the Arabian Peninsula

A security analyst who travels to the Gulf frequently believes the GCC countries all face similar security challenges from Islamic extremists: persistent threats, which include groups that come from the fringes of long-standing opposition and whose influence has ebbed and flowed over the years and acute threats, which are significant in size and scope and are typically unpredicted and unprecedented.

Regime responses depend almost always on *perception* of the threat rather than its nature:

1. "The Multi-path Approach"—The government uses a number of tactics to try to combat the extremist threat, relying heavily on information operations and public relations campaigns. Often this is to espouse a more "moderate" interpretation of Islam in an effort to debunk the extremists' violent interpretation. In this approach, the regime will also use various carrots and sticks to co-opt these groups.

2. "The Single Path Approach"—The regime turns to the security and military forces to wipe out the groups and uses courts to hand down severe punishments. In this approach, the government relies not on public relations but on the very direct message that they intend to crush these opponents. To do so, the regime employs its domestic security forces and police forces, which have traditionally been trained to confront coup attempts, riots and demonstrations, and low-level unrest. They have not, for the most part, been trained and equipped to fight the sophisticated, internationally-linked organizations that comprise the current terrorist threat.

So far, GCC countries have not been successful in quelling the Islamist threat employing only the multi-path approach and several have adopted the single-path approach. Whether the single-path approach will prove more effective against a new, network-based enemy is yet to be determined. The extremists that GCC regimes are fighting today represent a much different threat than the coup plotters of the past—these insurgents have a different ideology, they are well-armed, dispersed and able to communicate effectively with each other. Security forces will also have to

fight in urban settings, deal with collateral damage, and confront an elevated level of violence from this enemy.

To successfully confront the extremist threat in the GCC countries:

- The security forces need to be able to adapt quickly to the changing nature of warfare. They do not have adequate experience with this enemy and they must be reoriented to confront this threat effectively.

- Security forces must also build up their tactics and strategies aiming for longevity. The state security forces must in the long-term outlive these insurgents.

- Finally, a historical look at other counterinsurgencies reveals that the only way to be effective is for these regimes to move back to the multi-path approach. Successful counterinsurgencies have sustained a military compliment that overtime overwhelms the opposition force's ability to maintain combat capability, while at the same time giving those who would support this opposition better reasons not to support them—such as promising them a better future.

Iran and Terrorism: Ideology vs. Rationality

In the final presentation, the speaker discussed Iran's motivations for the use of terrorism arguing that since 1979 Iran's motivations to use terrorism have shifted from being ideological and religious in nature to a focus on state and national interest. To illustrate his point, the speaker compared Iran's response the Salman Rushdie affair in 1988 to the Islamic Republic's response to recent reports published in *Newsweek* concerning the desecration of the Quran by U.S. forces. Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa condemning Rushdie and the Satanic Verses sparked riots and demonstrations throughout the Islamic world, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Indonesia (and also made a celebrity out of Rushdie). In the days following the reports about the desecration of the Quran at Guantanamo, similar riots and demonstration took place throughout the Muslim world—even spreading to the Palestinian territories. However, the Iranian leadership gave little response and the situation in Iran remained calm. The speaker argued that Iran does not want to create new fronts among the countless differences that it already has with the world and with the United States.

From 1979 through Khomeini's death, Iran repudiated the prevailing norms of the international system through its rhetoric, public speeches, slogans, and actions worldwide. Over the years, the Iranian leadership has taken deliberate actions based on the ideals of the revolution. All of these ideals are backed by specific passages in the Quran and have found their way into the Iranian constitution. For example:

- The leadership has tried to convert non-Muslims to Islam—first at home by pressuring minorities and then abroad

- In its support of Hezbollah and Palestinian groups, Iran has played the role as defender of the oppressed against the oppressor

- The direct involvement in the assassination of Iranian citizens abroad and the serial killings of opposition in Iran

Today, Iran's overall policy toward terrorism has shifted. Although the exact direction the regime is taking remains uncertain, security threat facing the country today seems to be pushing the leadership down a more rational path. Iran is facing unrest in the Kurdish areas and the country is

surrounded in the east, west, and south by the presence of U.S. forces. Today, terrorism has little strategic utility for Iran. Incidents in which Iran has used terrorism in the past all indicate that they were tactical and didn't follow long-term strategic goals. Today, Iran sees terrorism in terms of national interest and no longer in terms of ideology. Iran has abandoned many of its revolutionary ideals. Now, the primary concern for Iran is state security and maintaining the region's existing political order.

The speaker believes Iran will eventually have to adopt a strictly rational policy. Internally, Iran needs to have a behavioral transformation of its worldview. This change would be facilitated if, in June 2005, Iran elects a strong president capable of limiting the power and scope of the Supreme Leader. Externally, Iran needs to consider the broader region. The transformations taking place in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan are significant and Iran should be thinking about how these events will impact its future. In terms of U.S. policy, engaging Iran in obligations and commitments will most likely work better than anything else. Ignoring the positive actions that Iran can take, labeling it part of the Axis of Evil, has not been fruitful and has only further isolated this regionally significant state.